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Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-sixth session
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Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2012/1.

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Please recycle

Statement

The critical role of women in advancing agricultural and rural development and in ensuring food security has been widely acknowledged. Member States have committed to providing rural women with equal access to productive resources and to markets, in recognition of their agency in rural and agricultural development. Despite the progress that has been made, rural women continue to have low levels of income, sparse access to education and health services, limited job security and limited land and inheritance rights. Again and again, their needs and contributions are relegated to the margins of policy development and budgetary considerations. In addition to the entrenched patterns of discrimination, unsustainable development practices, climate change and violence against women intensify the burden placed on women and their families.

When viewed in the broader context, the situation of rural women is but one of the symptoms of a social order characterized by inequity, violence and insecurity. As such, a vision for women's empowerment must go beyond making room for women to participate in society within the present social order, as this will not suffice to end the marginalization of rural populations and the entrenched patterns of discrimination against women. The empowerment of women requires profound changes in the minds and hearts of people and in the very structures of society. It begins with the understanding that the equality of women and men is more than a desired condition, to be achieved for the common good: it is a dimension of human reality. In those aspects that make human beings human, women and men are fundamentally equal. The goal at hand, then, is not only the empowerment of women for the advancement of agriculture and rural life; it is the full engagement of women with men in the construction of a new social order. Though marginalized by present-day economic and development frameworks, women are neither victims nor simply underresourced members of society. In fact, they represent the greatest source of untapped potential in the global effort to eradicate poverty and advance collective prosperity.

How, then, can we conceive of empowerment in a way that will begin to transform the current economic order and the condition of rural women? We offer three considerations that address access to knowledge, the nature of full participation and the importance of exploring diverse economic arrangements.

First, every human being has the right to access knowledge. Yet, the patterns of knowledge generation and diffusion in the current world order divide the world into producers and users of knowledge. This has deep implications for the quality and legitimacy of education, technology, decision-making and governance. For example, despite the fact that most agricultural work in developing countries is carried out by low-income women, the primary shapers and users of agricultural technologies have been men. A key challenge is how to strengthen women's capacities to identify technological needs and to create and adapt technologies in the light of social needs and resource constraints. Reforming the present flow of knowledge — from North to South, from urban to rural, from men to women — will free development from narrowly conceived conceptions of modernization.

Second, access to knowledge promotes meaningful and informed participation in decision-making at the family, community and higher levels of social administration. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and

services in some form, its primary concern must be to build the capacity of a given population to participate in creating a better world. It is imperative, then, that the educational process associated with such capacity-building assist rural women and girls to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as the driving force of an ongoing effort to apply knowledge to improve their own material and spiritual condition and to contribute to the betterment of their communities.

Third, the increased flow of goods, services, capital and labour within existing structures and processes benefit only very few people at the expense of many. This has given rise to the impoverishment of rural communities, the exploitation of vulnerable populations — women and children in particular — and the devastation of the environment. Such economic pressures have also led to the disappearance of diversified, ecologically sustainable small-scale agriculture, mostly found in rural areas, greatly affecting women, who carry out the bulk of the work. Local economies that have historically valued collective well-being over competition and individualism have grown increasingly insecure. To note these realities is not to present a naive idea of local economies but rather to stress that diverse economic arrangements need to be given space to develop.

The present document has highlighted just three challenges that need to be addressed in the effort to empower rural women. While many more challenges remain, the Baha'i International Community hopes that exploration of these issues can further the discourse on the role of rural women in advancing their own development and that of their communities. Moreover, it is hoped that such exploration will help to link these issues to the broader aim of promoting rural women's full engagement — shoulder to shoulder with men — in the construction of a more just social order.

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Statement submitted by Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Introduction to Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation

Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation was founded in 1966 by a Buddhist nun, the venerable Master Cheng Yen, on the poor rural eastern coast of Taiwan Province of China. Although she led a simple and austere monastic life, Master Cheng Yen still saw how the poor in her neighbourhood suffered from lack of food, medicine and shelter. She encouraged each of her supporters, initially housewives of minimal means, to save US$ 0.02 a day to help those in need. She teaches that we can help others even if we ourselves are poor — that giving is the privilege not of the rich or those of a certain gender, but of the sincere. Today, the majority of Tzu Chi volunteers are women from all walks of life.

The organization's name, "Tzu Chi", embodies its ideal: "Tzu" means "compassion" and "Chi" means "relief". Members of Tzu Chi Foundation strive to help the poor and educate the rich, while practising "great kindness even to strangers; great compassion as though we share the same body". Tzu Chi volunteers strive to see strangers, or even their enemies, as fundamentally deserving of a happiness, love and peace equal to their own.

Relying on the concept of equality as the basis of great love — irrespective of personal relationships, gender, religion, race, nationality or other affiliations — the approach of Tzu Chi echoes the mission of UN-Women in advocating for human rights, gender equality and women's economic security, and elimination of violence against women and poverty. The mission of Tzu Chi encompasses four main areas: charity, medicine, education and humanistic culture, as well as the cross-cutting areas of disaster relief, bone-marrow donation, environmental protection and community volunteerism. Tzu Chi has expanded its work to include over 40 countries around the world, largely through initiatives of local, mostly female, volunteers and, as of 2011, it has carried out international relief missions in over 70 countries. The development of Tzu Chi is a testament to the spirit of great love, which transcends gender, religion, race, nationality and other affiliations.

Mission of charity: Zulu women in South Africa

The mission of Tzu Chi in South Africa which includes three programmes — skills training centres, the Blue Bank sewing skills project and the lunch programme for orphans (agriculture and sustainability) — serves as an example of the work of Tzu Chi in a particular country, and also provides a focus for themes to be considered by the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-sixth session: gender equality, education in training, security, women's economic rights through strengthening women's entrepreneurship, access to markets, ownership, leadership and reduction in domestic violence.

Tzu Chi first carried out its charity work in South Africa in 1992. Because of apartheid, Tzu Chi was able reach black populations of the country only after 1994. Of the nine native tribes in South Africa which are matriarchal, the Zulu community is the largest. Although blacks in the country are generally poor, Zulu women exhibit dexterity in crafting beautiful objects, threading beads and weaving. One component of the charity goals of Tzu Chi in South Africa has been to help eradicate hunger and poverty through improving living standards, promoting social

participation and strengthening skills so as to foster greater sustainability and security.

Tzu Chi has been establishing skills training centres across Durban since 1995; today, there are 524 skills training centres within different Zulu communities in Durban. Each Zulu woman is responsible for providing for her family; and the fact that she is able to work at centres located within her own community can help to improve social cohesion and prevent domestic violence. In each community, Zulu women with experience and skills were identified and encouraged to be teachers and leaders at each centre. Throughout the training process, leadership and operational sessions were held to help each leader acquire the skills needed to manage her centre independently. Because each Zulu community has teachers with different skills, each skills training centre makes and sells products unique to each community.

Tzu Chi volunteers have the same strong commitment possessed by members of UN-Women, a commitment based on the belief that every human has the right to realize her potential so as to benefit others. Thus, Tzu Chi volunteers exercise this universal right by springing into action whenever they discover someone in need, while working through the existing welfare system and filling in gaps. Recipients of charity gradually became economically secure, and some Zulu women have also discovered that through being rich in love, they, too, could help others in difficult situations and experience the joy of giving. Although some went to work elsewhere in the area of manufacturing after completing their training, the majority stayed at their centre. Every skills training centre uses all its profits to sustain centre operations, to improve the quality of life of their communities, and to raise awareness about helping others in need.

Similar in nature to the skills training centres, the Blue Bank project is focused on teaching sewing skills; it has helped women near Ladysmith to become self-sufficient since 2004. With fabric and sewing machines and needles, women make clothing for sale. Although their consumers are limited to members of their own communities and their production volume is small (compared with that of mass-production textile companies), they manage to reinvest part of the income derived from the sale of their sewing to the Blue Bank project in order to assist in the purchase of materials for the sewing training centres.

A third key Tzu Chi project in South Africa, one that works to address the vital need of eliminating hunger in poverty-stricken areas, is the lunch programme for orphans. The lunch programme is a sustainable project which is mainly supported by the produce grown by each Zulu community throughout Durban. As of 2011, Tzu Chi Zulu volunteers in Durban have been providing lunch every day to more than 5,000 orphans. Encouraged by Tzu Chi South Africa, each Zulu community started to grow its own vegetables. Tzu Chi has also provided resources, farming skills and training on how to apply for farming land from the Government and cultivate vegetables in backyards. The harvested vegetables are often sufficient in respect of providing for families, communities and the lunch programme. Some also sell their produce in exchange for cash. If there is a poor harvest season, Zulu communities also raise funds to purchase vegetables or food from outside sources in support of the lunch programme. Indeed, the truly rich are those who are rich in love: we do not need to become financially wealthy before helping others.

These three programmes empower local communities, in particular Zulu women. More and more women have gained greater self-confidence, have taken responsibility for helping the sick and needy and have stood up on their own. Leaders from community churches, among others, have also become Tzu Chi volunteers in South Africa. Currently, in Durban, over 5,000 Zulu women have become regular volunteers.

The work of Tzu Chi reflects what its volunteers perceive to be advocated by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,[1] namely, inspiring and empowering people one by one until hearts of infinite love spring forth. Together, we can alleviate the suffering and turmoil in our society and eliminate disasters. No person can be neglected and no one should be underestimated.

While the confidence, skills and social status of Zulu volunteers have increased over the years, volunteers still keep Master Cheng Yen's teachings close to their hearts. A lifestyle that is simple and characterized by fewer desires, yet able to fulfil basic needs, serves to not only protect our environment, but slow the pace of global warming, thereby slowing the frequency and intensity of natural disasters caused by increased consumption of energy and other resources. The cries of the Earth, expressed through disasters, are a wake-up call to us — one that urges that we reflect mindfully and repent of those of our actions that have been driven by greed, anger and ignorance. Hence, Tzu Chi volunteers have not sought to become wealthy in terms of worldly goods. Instead, content with a simple life, they achieve fulfilment by sharing their love and the experience and wisdom gained by addressing poverty and hunger in their local communities.

In Tzu Chi, empowerment means the empowerment of love and compassion in each person's heart, expressed through helping others to the point where they themselves can stand on their own. When a person's love and compassion for all sentient beings begins to resonate, that person becomes empowered. Thus, those who are poor are in fact rich — rich in kindness and happiness. More Zulu women have become self-sufficient through practising their skills, inter alia, in agriculture, crafts and manufacturing; and others find joy in performing social work in their neighbourhood. A harmonious society and a world free of disasters can be created through the aggregation of many selfless hearts. These gentle forces continue to motivate volunteers in South Africa and the neighbouring countries of Lesotho and Zimbabwe.

[1] United Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. 1249, No. 20378.

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Statement submitted by Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Introduction

Eradication of poverty is the greatest global challenge facing the world today. Poverty is pervasive in developing countries, especially in the rural areas where 70 per cent of the world's poorest live, as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) points out in the *Rural Poverty Report 2011*.

In developing countries, most rural households remain dependent on primitive agriculture. Some 2 billion farmers, the majority of whom are women, engage in small-scale agriculture. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that two thirds of the female labour force in developing economies are engaged in agricultural activities. Women generally play an important role in crop production, livestock care and in water and fuel collection for their families.

The typical fate of a rural woman is a demanding combination of unpaid subsistence farming and caring for an extended family. Older rural women contribute significantly to the family and their communities, especially in cases where, left behind by migrating adults or as a result of other socio-economic factors, they are obliged to assume childcare, household and agricultural responsibilities.

Culture of discrimination

Ultimately, the eradication of poverty will come about only if the systemic and structural causes are addressed. Challenging the cultural, traditional and normative practices that condone inequality, discrimination and violence against women and girls is critical to the eradication of poverty, as Ol Fawole stated in an article entitled "Economic violence to women and girls: is it receiving the necessary attention?" published in *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* in 2008.

The pattern of occupational inequality stems from a culture of discrimination which denies women access to the basic ingredients of economic status — education, land and decent work. Other obstacles to the enjoyment by women and girls of their rights arise when they are prevented from going to school or from accessing health care, or are subject to harmful traditional practices.

Women in rural areas have limited mobility and access to resources and are disproportionately affected by such phenomena as natural disasters, fires, flood and other environmental hazards.

Legal rights

Although women play a major role in crop production, few are landowners. Women are frequently denied entitlement to land, property and inheritance. It is estimated that women constitute one third or less of all landowners and own less than 10 per cent of the world's property.

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, women obtain land rights chiefly through their husbands. They lose these rights when they are divorced or widowed. The spread of HIV/AIDS has exacerbated the problem of widows losing their rights to land (see "Improving women's lives: progress and obstacles", available from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Resources,Chap.2.pdf). According

to a UN-Women briefing, not even 2 per cent of land is owned by women in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Land ownership by women has contributed to their empowerment and security. Not only does land provide a means of livelihood, it can also be used as collateral for loans to generate income. In many countries, the right to collect water and firewood and grazing rights for animals are dependent upon land ownership. Without land as collateral, it is difficult for women to open bank accounts, gain access to credit, receive training or obtain tools. Without the security of land or income, women and their families struggle for livelihood, education, sanitation, health care and other basic rights. Additionally, researchers have found that widely dispersed ownership of property is an essential component of a just and moral economics system.

The Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women both affirm the rights of rural women to land and property and to equal treatment in land and agrarian reform. Nonetheless, many rural women do not have equal rights to property under the law or in actual practice at the grass-roots level.

Poverty reduction will be strengthened by laws that ensure women's rights to land ownership and inheritance (see General Assembly resolution 64/215). The enhanced economic security of women who own property contributes to the reduction of feminized poverty and domestic violence.

Access to resources, including education

Women continue to have less access than men to productive resources, including education, health care, land, decent work, information and financial resources. This reduced access hinders women's ability to participate in the economy and to contribute to higher living standards for their families. For example, inefficient allocation of productive resources within households causes significant output losses and low investment in girls' education significantly reduces a country's economic output.

Women and girls are important economic actors. The *Gender Gap Report 2010* notes that greater gender equality correlates with a higher gross national product. Although few women own land, they produce more than 50 per cent of the world's food. It is estimated that providing women farmers access to tools and resources could reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 150 million.

Rural women are less likely than men to have access to useful non-formal education or training opportunities, with the exception of literacy courses and courses in handicrafts. Women perform most farming tasks and therefore lack equal access to formal education. A recent IFAD/FAO study notes that in Africa women very rarely participate in courses on animal traction and animal health even when they are the ones doing the livestock-raising. Such gender bias continues to exist and must be addressed.

Improving women's access to education and to non-formal training needs to be done in conjunction with improving their access to other assets and opportunities.

Conclusion

Social and economic indicators for developing countries consistently show that women bear the brunt of hardship in poor communities. Women are not only on the front line in producing the food which feeds the majority of the world's population, but they are also key agents in the reduction of poverty. As the Secretary-General of the United Nations noted in his message on the occasion of the International Day of Rural Women, 15 October 2011, "despite the heavy responsibilities rural women shoulder, they lack equal access to opportunities and resources".

Poverty will continue, especially in rural areas, as long as inequality of rights and opportunities exists between women and girls and men and boys. Because education is universally accepted as a key to poverty eradication and social development, it is imperative that gender parity be achieved at all levels of education. Ultimately, experience demonstrates that education is more effective than laws in empowering women and girls to overcome the barriers to equality.

A more just and equal world will only be built when men and women work together to resolve the issue of poverty. Both men and women have crucial but differentiated roles to play in changing the dominant social customs and cultural practices that are prejudiced against women and that condone violence against women and girls.

Recommendations

We urge Member States:

- To design, revise and implement laws to ensure that rural women are accorded full and equal rights to own and lease land and other property, including through the right to inheritance
- To initiate administrative reforms and other necessary measures to give women the same access as men to credit, capital, appropriate technologies, information and markets
- To uphold and protect the rights of rural women to land, resources and benefits that arise from the management of their households
- To increase investments in small-scale agriculture, especially for women farmers
- To provide for the basic needs of rural women through the adoption of a social protection floor that responds to the specific needs of the country
- To undertake a systematic reform of education at all levels in order to ensure equality of access to, and the availability of, gender-sensitive and rights-based education for all.

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Statement submitted by Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

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Please recycle

Statement

The economic empowerment of rural women workers through rights at work, education and public investment

Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International recognize the contribution of women to growing, processing and preparing food and, in particular, the contribution of women on family farms to ensuring global food security, which is key, knowing that today 1 billion people are living in hunger. We welcome measures to ensure that women have access to and ownership of land and have access to credit, markets, technology and all measures that empower and assist them in eradicating poverty and hunger. The situation of rural women workers, in particular in agriculture, also needs to be addressed. They are all too frequently ignored by researchers and academics, policymakers and legislators. The global trade union movement calls for specific measures to ensure the economic, social and political empowerment of all rural women workers, including access to public goods, legal and social protection, and public investment in social and physical infrastructure and effective service delivery. This is most urgently needed: out of the 1.4 billion people living in extreme poverty (i.e., on less than $1.25 per day), 1 billion are in rural areas.

Employment of women in agriculture

Agriculture remains a significant employment sector. In 1991, 45.2 per cent of total employment was in agriculture, but by 2007 that share had fallen to 34.9 per cent. Women make up 41.3 per cent of the total and work across all agricultural sectors. They work as day labourers, seasonal workers and migrant workers, on plantations and in pack houses, glasshouses and cold stores, although the percentage of the workforce they constitute varies and job classifications are often gender-defined. In the tea sector, which employs millions of workers globally, women are the largest segment of the workforce. In the banana industry they are mainly confined to pack houses. In newer crop industries, such as cut flowers and export horticulture, women make up a majority of the workforce in both harvesting and packing.

Current challenges

Agriculture is, regrettably, characterized by significant decent work deficits. Agricultural workers are often denied access to even the most basic of rights covered in the core conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO), on freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively, the elimination of all forms of discrimination, equality at work and the elimination of child labour and bonded and forced labour. In addition, according to the 2008 ILO report entitled "Promotion of rural employment for poverty reduction", labour inspection is often non-existent or weak.

Women in particular face inequalities when trying to access decent work. For instance, owing to practices of employers who offer women short-term contracts

Note: The statement has been prepared in partnership with International Union of Food Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, an organization on the Roster.

and/or demand a pregnancy test before offering employment, women workers cannot exercise their right to maternity benefits.

Apart from the multiple roles women have as household managers and family carers, as organizers and providers of community services and in the economy, rural women workers in particular have the longest working day. The unequal sharing of family responsibilities between women and men and the absence of quality public services lead to excessive hours of paid and unpaid work for women and limit women's access to paid work.

The low participation and representation of women in decision-making in rural areas, a problem more acute in rural areas than in urban areas, inevitably leads to biases in priorities, policies and programmes.

Further, agriculture ranks as one of the most dangerous industries. Injuries and fatalities are common, often leading to incapacity or death, which plunge families deeper into poverty. Women working in packhouses and the cut flower industry often contract upper limb disorders through repetitive work and poor workstations.

Evidence gathered by trade unions indicates that sexual harassment is widespread, especially when women are on temporary contracts or piece rates. Employers often demand sexual favours before renewing contracts and/or paying full entitlements.

Use of child labour in rural areas is widespread, with agriculture being the biggest user across all sectors. ILO estimates that 60 per cent of all child labour is in agriculture. This means that 132 million girls and boys aged 5 to 14 are working in agriculture, often doing work that is hazardous to their health and/or interferes with their education.

The severe decent work deficits of women and men rural workers, as well the existence of child labour, need to be effectively addressed in rural employment and poverty reduction programmes and policies.

In addition, providing rural workers with access to social protection must be a priority. It is an important step towards the formalization of their working situation. The Commission on the Status of Women must express support for the conclusions of the ILO general discussion on social protection that took place during the 100th session of the International Labour Conference and for the report of the ILO Social Protection Floor Advisory Group chaired by Michelle Bachelet, entitled "Social protection floor for a fair and inclusive globalization". Governments must set up social protection floors, with the technical support of ILO, to make sure that female rural workers are effectively covered. The role of the social partners is crucial in building a social protection floor for rural working women.

Empowering rural women through public investment

Privatization and the reduction of the role of the State in economic life have had an acute impact on the lives of women in rural areas. Because of their specific productive and reproductive roles and position within society, rural women have been among the worst affected by cuts in social spending, where substantial costs have been shifted from the State to the household.

There are few rural areas where the demand for health and care services, including for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, water, sanitation and

transport services and access to energy supplies is met by existing provisions. As a consequence, rural women have been forced to take on an increasing burden of unpaid work (care tasks, obtaining food, collecting water and firewood, etc.). A World Bank study found that women in rural Africa spend 65 per cent of their time on journeys on foot.

Studies show that women work 12 to 13 hours a week more than men. Improvements in rural infrastructure, such as affordable and safe water, sanitation and energy near the home, and accessible and affordable modes of transport could dramatically improve the "time poverty" of rural women.

The provision of public services in rural areas is also a key driver in the creation of quality jobs for women and men, rural development and the expansion of social protection, which remains non-existent or inadequate in rural areas.

The Monterrey Consensus noted that investments in basic economic and social infrastructure, social services and social protection, including education, health, nutrition, shelter and social security programmes, which were gender sensitive and fully inclusive of the rural sector, were vital for enabling people to adapt to and benefit from changing economic conditions and opportunities.

The United Nations Millennium Project has emphasized the importance of expanding rural access to vital public services and infrastructure in meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Education is key to the empowerment of girls and women in rural areas

There is universal agreement that economic and political empowerment of women and girls through education is the key to development. Education of women and girls is the most effective means of eliminating child labour, the best remedy against child marriage and the best medicine for improving maternal health.

Despite the obvious benefits of education, data show that in particular poor girls from rural areas and from ethnic minority or indigenous groups have the lowest education and literacy levels: rural location compounds wealth and gender disadvantages, reflecting the impact of cultural attitudes and the unequal burden of household labour. According to *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 2010, among indigenous peoples, poverty and gender discrimination further exacerbate education deprivation. The Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, in her message on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March 2011, stated that globally, two thirds of the 796 million illiterate adults are women.

Rural and indigenous women and the environment

Rural and indigenous women's lives and livelihoods are directly threatened by climate change, environmental degradation, militarization, ethnic and religious discrimination and economic policies that make small-scale subsistence farming unsustainable.

Women are affected more severely and are more at risk from natural disasters and extreme weather events, including during post-disaster response efforts. Women's exclusion from decision-making and limited access to and control over

resources impede their rights. In the case of climate change, it means that women's voices are absent from decisions about environmental management, climate change adaptation and mitigation, with long-term consequences for the well-being of women, their families and the sustainability of their communities. It is therefore important to articulate rural and indigenous women's critical role and capacity in the nurturing of a sustainable ecological system.

Rural domestic workers

Millions of women work as domestic workers. In rural areas it is not uncommon for the wife or girl child of an agricultural worker to be expected to "help out" in the employer's household. Their work goes unrecognized, unacknowledged, in particular because it takes place in private households.

Governments fail to extend to domestic workers the rights and benefits that other workers enjoy. Global unions campaigned successfully for the adoption of a new ILO Convention 189, Domestic Workers Convention, 2011. In 2012, their "12 by 12" campaign will aim at the ratification and the implementation of ILO Convention 189 in 12 countries.

Conclusions

Education International, International Trade Union Confederation and Public Services International, supported by International Union of Food Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations, call on Member States at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women to:

- Ensure that the concept of decent work and the creation of decent jobs are fully incorporated into rural development strategies
- Review, extend and effectively implement national legislation that covers all rural women workers, including agricultural workers, and ratify and implement ILO conventions, including: C110, Plantations Convention; C131, Minimum Wage Fixing Convention; C129, Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention; C141, Rural Workers' Organizations Convention; C156, Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention; C138, Minimum Age Convention; and C182, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention; C183, Maternity Protection Convention; C184, Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention; and C189, Domestic Workers Convention
- Implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform of Action and the Millennium Development Goals (on gender equality and women's economic and political empowerment)
- Set up social protection floors with the technical support of ILO to make sure that female rural workers are effectively covered
- Ensure that gender-responsive budgeting, gender mainstreaming and gender-sensitive employment policies are systematically integrated into the design and the implementation of rural development policies, programmes and budgets
- Strengthen rural labour inspection

- Develop innovative communication strategies to ensure that rural women workers are aware of their rights, in particular maternity rights
- Ensure the provision of public quality education free of charge and with adequate facilities, qualified teachers, good sanitation and safe transportation, in order to increase the enrolment and retention of girls in schools and reduce child labour. Incentives for families to send their girls to school, gender-sensitive relevant curricula and textbooks, opportunities for further education and training, and access and entry to the labour market make a difference
- Provide incentives for qualified female teachers to work in rural and isolated areas and introduce measures to ensure their safety
- Develop and combine rural vocational educational training opportunities and qualifications with employment promotion, which is a recognized link between rural employment, poverty reduction and food security
- Establish consultative processes that call for social dialogue with trade unions; create opportunities for rural women to participate fully and effectively in decision-making processes, including development planning.

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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives: priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Family Care International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Please recycle

Statement

Family Care International (FCI) welcomes the theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women: "Empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges", and the review theme on "Financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women", and recognizes their relationship to the issue of reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health. In our work to make pregnancy and childbirth safer in the developing world, we have found that rural women often face greater challenges in accessing the health care they need compared with their urban counterparts.

FCI was the first international organization dedicated to maternal health, having been founded out of a determination to remedy the neglect of women's health and eliminate the barriers to access to care that lead to maternal mortality and morbidity. In rural villages, we work with local partners and communities to raise awareness, create innovative solutions and tools, and implement effective programmes and services that improve maternal and reproductive health outcomes in the communities where women are still dying every day. Our work is designed to empower individuals and strengthen and support civil society.

Each year, more than 350,000 women die from pregnancy-related causes, and an estimated 210 million more suffer injuries or develop lifelong disabilities, including obstetric fistula. Maternal mortality and morbidity are unacceptable reminders of the enormous inequities existing between rich and poor women within countries. Rates of death and disability are higher in rural areas and among poorer and less-educated communities. The reasons why women do not receive the care they need before, during and after childbirth are manifold. If there are services nearby, they are often too expensive or of low quality or insensitive to women's needs. Much of the time, services are not available in rural areas and the ability to access them is limited by cost, poor infrastructure and gender-based barriers to making care-seeking decisions. Maternity care must be improved where the need is greatest — in the rural health centres and dispensaries closest to women — with a focus on crucial components for effective and lifesaving care: strengthening infrastructure, addressing equipment and supply gaps, improving provider skills, strengthening referral systems and strengthening supervision and health service management. These components are necessary to ensure that rural women do not continue to die owing to preventable pregnancy-related factors.

Many rural women are even further discriminated against based on ethnicity, lack of education and cultural bias. Efforts must be intensified to address the needs of these underserved and marginalized women. In Latin America, indigenous women are at higher risk of pregnancy-related suffering. For instance, in Guatemala, where 42 per cent of the population is indigenous, maternal mortality is three times higher among indigenous women than among non-indigenous women; and when services are available, they are often insensitive to the cultural needs and traditions of indigenous women.

Work is needed to ensure the provision of more culturally appropriate and acceptable care, which can in turn increase rural and indigenous women's desire to access skilled care at birth. In poor and remote rural districts in Africa, community-based engagement is key in acquiring services and improving the quality of health care. To respond to local needs, educational tools should be created not just in

English, French and Spanish, but also in the languages of streets and villages — for instance, in Kichwa (an indigenous language of the Andes), Haitian Creole, Swahili (East Africa), Bambara and Fulani (West Africa); or they should be produced using images instead of words, for use in low-literacy communities.

In working with youth, the focus must be on reaching young women who are out of school and desperately need access to information and services. Complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among adolescent girls in most developing countries. In fact, rural girls are the most disadvantaged group in the developing world: they are much more likely than rural boys and their urban sisters to lack education, access to health services and the means for economic self-sufficiency and have very little decision-making power in their daily lives. As rural environments are often characterized by resistance to change, rural girls also face greater pressures than their urban sisters to adhere to traditional practices and customs, many of which reinforce their subordination, including early marriage (and childbearing) and female genital cutting. Education, means of livelihood and reproductive health have been identified as the three main areas where intervention is essential for the advancement of rural girls' development.

For the goals set at the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women, and the Millennium Development Goals, to be achieved, empowerment of rural women through provision of and access to comprehensive reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health care is key. Such care is a crucial factor in empowering rural women and girls so that they can be healthy and safe and play an active role in their communities and in implementing the larger development agenda.

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Statement submitted by Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society applauds the work of the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-sixth session to further the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges.

We recognize the painful reality that women throughout the world, particularly those in rural and poverty-stricken areas, are often oppressed, marginalized and victimized. Notably, many of these same women are also the unsung heroes of society. In the direst of circumstances, they quietly find a way to selflessly care for their children, their families and others. Their plight deserves our closest attention and best work.

Such women were among those mentioned by the Secretary-General on the International Day of Families on 15 May 2009. He stated that mothers played a critical role in the family, which was a powerful force for social cohesion and integration. The mother-child relationship, he added, was vital for the healthy development of children. Furthermore, mothers were not only caregivers but also breadwinners for their families.

Clearly, to empower mothers is to empower families, which are at the centre of any successful development effort. In 2004, the year designated by the General Assembly as the Tenth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family, the Secretary-General emphasized the indispensable role that families played in development.

Families have major, albeit often untapped, potential to contribute to national development and to the achievement of major objectives of every society and of the United Nations, including the eradication of poverty and the creation of just, stable and secure societies (see A/59/176, para. 4).

We must not forget that the family is a vital partner in efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and the many other objectives set by the international community during the last decade (see A/59/PV.67).

Why the family is indispensable to development is explained in the Plan of Action on the Family in Africa, launched in July 2004 by the African Union, distilling centuries of experience.

In Africa, as a result of the family's multiple roles and functions, the centrality, uniqueness and indispensability of the family in society is unquestionable. For generations, the family has been a source of strength for guidance and support, providing members with a wide circle of relatives on whom they can fall back. In times of crisis, unemployment, sickness, poverty, old age and bereavement, most people rely on family as the main source of material, social and emotional support and social security. Therefore, the African family network is the prime mechanism for coping with social, economic and political adversity in the continent. For the African Union, the family remains the touchstone of all successful development.

Recognition that the family is the basic and most fundamental unit of society, a dynamic unit engaged in an intertwined process of individual and group development, justifies the need to place the African family at the core of society, which needs to be strengthened as part of Africa's development process.

The family continues to play a crucial role in Africa's development, and development efforts that are family-centred are key to sustainable socio-economic development.

It is imperative that the African family be well positioned to play a crucial role in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (see the Plan of Action on the Family in Africa).

Nor is the family's pivotal role in development restricted to the continent of Africa. Maria Sophia Aguirre, Associate Professor from the Department of Business and Economics of the Catholic University of America, in her article entitled "The family and economic development: socioeconomic relevance and policy design", asks the question, "Is the family relevant for economic development?" She answers that data from across countries and sciences seem to clearly suggest that the family should be the point of reference if sustainable development is to be achieved. This is not so because the family is a problem to economic development — it is the solution. It is within the family where human, moral, and social capital, all sine qua non conditions for an economy to develop, are either encouraged and nurtured or hampered. Children develop best within a family that is functional, i.e., with a mother and a father in a stable marriage. This means that the family is a necessary good for economic development, and thus it should be promoted and protected if sustainable development is to be achieved. At the same time, data across sciences also show that the breakdown of the family damages the economy and the society since human, moral, and social capital is reduced and social costs increased.

The Howard Center believes that in order to provide the maximum benefit for rural women — and the societies in which they live — around the globe, the policies and programmes created by the Commission on the Status of Women at its fifty-sixth session should be designed in the larger context of strengthening the institution that is the core of all successful development: the family.

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Statement submitted by Human Rights Advocates, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

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Please recycle

Statement

The problem of food security for rural women and the impact of household food security on women's personal security

Introduction

This statement addresses the challenges facing rural women in achieving food security, focusing specifically on women's access to natural and productive resources, the association between household food security and poverty and the impact of food insecurity on women's personal security. In 1979, the General Assembly highlighted the importance of these issues in their adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In particular, article 14 acknowledges the role that rural women play in the economic survival of their households and sets forth the appropriate measures State parties must take to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas and strengthen women's role in rural development. Although 187 States are party to the Convention, rural women continue to face sizeable gender gaps in agricultural production, household poverty, income-generating opportunities and personal security.

National food security: women's access to natural and productive resources

National food security is largely dependent on the work of rural women in the agricultural sector. According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) in 2011, rural women produce approximately 50 per cent of the world's food. However, unequal access to natural and productive resources, such as land, credit, technology, and education, stymies women's agricultural productivity. By removing these obstacles, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that rural women could raise the total agricultural output by 2.5 to 4 per cent, thereby reducing world hunger by 12 to 17 per cent (FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11: Women in Agriculture – Closing the Gender Gap for Development*, Rome 2011).

While access to land and financial assets are at the core of ensuring agricultural productivity, rural women have consistently been disadvantaged in their availability. With regard to land, women across all developing countries are less likely to own and operate land, and the land they do have access to is often of poorer quality and frequently mediated through a male relative. For example, the World Bank reported that in 2009, women in Mexico accounted for only 22.4 per cent of registered landholders in communal farming lands, while that figure fell to less than 10 per cent in India, Nepal and Thailand. Moreover, access to land is incontrovertibly linked to financial assets, such as credit. Institutional discrimination by public and private lenders often pushes women out of the market or grants them considerably smaller loans than men. This is especially true in Japan and the Republic of Korea, where tradition affords membership of credit cooperatives only to heads of household, which in these patriarchal societies is typically a man.

Additionally, women face similar challenges in their access to technology and education, both of which are vital to agricultural productivity. With respect to technology, gender gaps are prevalent among a host of farming technologies, ranging from fertilizers to machinery. For example, in Ghana, only 39 per cent of

female farmers, as opposed to 59 per cent of male farmers, adopted improved crop varieties because they had fewer natural and productive resources. This gap can also be explained by lower levels of human capital among rural women, primarily in education. Although studies have shown that education is strongly correlated with agricultural productivity and household welfare, there continues to be a widespread bias against women in education. This is most evident in Ghana, where women have an average of approximately 2.5 years of education, compared with 5 years for men.

Household food security: women and poverty

Even with a thriving agricultural sector, rural women continue to face challenges in creating food and nutritional security within their households. In most rural areas, a major challenge to household food security stems from women's dual role of providing income for their households and tending to domestic responsibilities, which typically include food preparation, childcare and gathering household necessities (see written statement entitled "Anchoring food security amongst rural women subsistence farmers: Ghana as a model", submitted by Human Rights Advocates at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women). All activities considered, studies have found that women generally work longer hours than men. In fact, a microstudy in India found that on a one-hectare farm, women worked 3,485 hours per year, compared with 1,212 hours for men. The extent of women's work is also evident in Ghana, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zambia, where women are responsible for 65 per cent of all transport activities in rural households, including the collection of fuel and water, in addition to completing their domestic tasks. Consequently, these trade-offs in the allocation of women's time leave few options for labour market participation, particularly in the agricultural sector.

Given that income is indicative of a household's ability to secure food, poverty is also a major threat to the food security of rural women in developing countries. In recent years, the percentage of female-headed households has risen dramatically, and evidence has shown that these households are overrepresented among the poor. The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action recognized that this overrepresentation is largely due to wage discrimination, occupational segregation and other gender-based barriers. For example, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 55 per cent of rural households are headed by women, a majority of whom are more likely to work in the informal labour market and make less than half the salary of a man employed in similar activities.

The impact of food insecurity on women's personal security

As a result of poverty and food insecurity, rural women are also at an increased risk of violence, particularly domestic violence. Although domestic violence occurs across all socio-economic classes, impoverished women are more likely to experience it. When men with low socio-economic status are unable to provide for their families, they may resort to violence, particularly against their wives or partners, out of frustration and hopelessness. In India, where poverty affects almost 30 per cent of the rural population, a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) survey of violence against women found that in 94 per cent of cases, the victim and her attacker were related, and in 90 per cent of those cases, the wife was victimized by her husband. Moreover, the same survey revealed that 9 out of every 10 murders of women were the result of husbands killing their wives.

Domestic violence is also a common occurrence within the "private sphere" in places with large marginalized rural populations such as Nicaragua, the second poorest country in Latin America. In fact, reports indicate that 30 per cent of Nicaraguan women between the ages of 15 to 49 have been abused by their husband or partner (see Marina Prieto-Carrón, "Gender-based violence in the lives of Nicaraguan women maquila workers", Central America Women's Network Newsletter, No. 21, 2006). Even more alarming is the number of women who suffer in complete silence; studies show that 37 per cent of Nicaraguan women who endure physical violence at the hands of their husbands never speak to anyone about it.

Rural women living in hunger and poverty are also more vulnerable to human trafficking. UNFPA notes that traffickers are able to operate in this context, where they can exploit the uncertain economic situations of impoverished women. For example, South Asia accounts for 40 per cent of the world's absolute poor who live on less than a dollar per day, and have an estimated 2 million women participating in the commercial sex trade. Indeed, 35 per cent of girls and women trafficked from Nepal to India were brought under the pretext of better paying jobs and relief from poverty.

Moreover, vulnerability to human trafficking has also resulted from changing patterns in migration. In Ecuador, where 42 per cent of the population lives in poverty, desperate socio-economic conditions drive men to migrate out of the country in search of employment. Without a steady stream of household income, the women left behind become even more impoverished, increasing the likelihood that they — and their daughters — will become victims of trafficking.

Recommendations

We urge Governments to take appropriate measures to increase food security for women living in rural areas by researching and implementing programmes aimed at achieving the following:

- Increasing the number of rural women in local and national decision-making bodies to address gender inequalities in agricultural production, particularly women's access to natural and productive resources, as well as access to human capital.
- Reducing poverty in rural areas, particularly in women-headed households, by increasing the percentage of female employment, eliminating wage disparities between the sexes and addressing the complex trade-offs rural women make in their allocation of time that prevents their participation in the labour market.
- Eliminating violence against women by passing and enforcing national legislation, criminalizing all forms of gender-based violence, including but not limited to, intimate partner violence, rape, sexual assault and "femicide", and ensuring that the perpetrators of these crimes are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.
- Educating children on the principles of gender equality from their earliest stages of development with the goal of eliminating institutional and social forms of patriarchy, which has served as the taproot and leading justification for discrimination against women in both the public and private spheres of society.

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Statement submitted by International Council of Women, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Please recycle

Statement

We are pleased to submit this statement from the International Council of Women, a global umbrella non-governmental organization (NGO) representing millions of women worldwide in over 60 member countries.

We applaud the decision of the Commission to focus on the empowerment of rural women as the main agenda item at the fifty-sixth session of the Commission. In many of our member countries women provide the skills, labour and dedication to assure a safe food supply. Despite their efforts, often in circumstances of dire hardship, the livelihoods of many rural women are becoming uncertain. Many are fearful of the future. With rising populations and changes in crop yields and harvest patterns due in part to the impacts of climate change, a depressed global economy and civil strife, rural women are struggling to maintain their productivity. The challenges are great, varying in different regions of the world from devastating natural disasters to problems of land rights and widows' rights to inheritance.

We urge the Commission to make recommendations at this session, which will frame strong action to support rural women by:

(a) Providing the infrastructure — transport and communications — for speedy access to markets;

(b) Ensuring that women farmers have adequate facilities in rural centres for the sale of their produce;

(c) Establishing gender sensitive credit schemes for women farmers to enable them to increase their productivity;

(d) Recognizing and acknowledging the critical importance of their efforts to overcome poverty and eradicate malnutrition.

The International Council of Women, in supporting initiatives to empower rural women, urges Governments to work with village communities to revise customary law and abolish harmful practices affecting women and girls, to enable them to enjoy equality, the right to own property, including land, and to have full access to education and training.

Our Development Project Fund has continually added value to women's agricultural production through the provision of livestock, village water tanks and educational resources and training in literacy, human rights, budgeting, marketing and strategic planning. At our recent meetings, the role of women as food producers and change-makers on climate, defending the integrity of the planet, has been high on the agenda. Action by NGOs, especially women's NGOs like the International Council of Women, to conserve energy, plant trees, preserve local soil resources and carry out education at the local level for a carbon-free environment will be pivotal to the future health and well-being of the global community. In developing a toolkit for community education the International Council of Women is leading the way towards a sustainable environment. Rural women, as essential food producers, are central to a sustainable economy.

Work on sustainability was at the heart of the International Council of Women triennial theme 2003-2006, with its focus on women in sustainable development: poverty eradication, water and the girl child. In November 2011, in preparation for the fifty-sixth session of the Commission, the International Council of Women's

Asia-Pacific Regional Council Seminar and Training Workshop in Nadi, Fiji, had as its theme "Women in agriculture: building a sustainable future". Women's contribution to a sustainable global economy as change-makers and entrepreneurs was linked to attaining the Millennium Development Goals. The Training Workshop was called "Women, food security and health". Outcomes and recommendations have provided a firm new threshold for the delivery of strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change, enhance regional food security and improve overall health status and nutrition at the community level.

At these meetings of the International Council of Women, women were challenged and empowered.

Women farmers provide essential food production in every region, but they face critical challenges. For many, their access to land for grazing and cultivation is uncertain. Increasing population growth in many countries and the recent rise in the cost of food means it will be necessary to increase worldwide food production between 70 and 100 per cent by mid-century. In this environment the ability of rural women to increase their production will be the key to the provision of a continuing adequate food supply. Visionary outcomes from the fifty-sixth session of the Commission will do much to ensure that rural women are able to play their part in bridging the gap between food production and food consumption, which threatens future generations. Please be assured that the International Council of Women, through its affiliated national councils and representation at the United Nations, will be working to carry forward these outcomes.

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Statement submitted by International Federation of Social Workers, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

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Statement

The International Federation of Social Workers supports the theme of rural women for the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The Federation is a global federation of social-work organizations, representing more than 500,000 members worldwide (see www.ifsw.org). The goal is to promote the practice of social work based on social-justice principles. The emphasis on economic and social development for rural women is especially relevant to the Federation, as social workers all over the world work to advance and empower rural women.

The Federation supports the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Millennium Development Goals, which set out clear goals and guidelines to promote women's advancement and gender mainstreaming in all aspects of international development. The Federation is also committed to advancing women's rights within a human rights framework, as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), which 187 nations have ratified to date.

The Federation supports the Commission in addressing rural women as an especially vulnerable subset of women globally. The Federation also works to promote the accomplishments and empowerment of rural women in eradicating poverty and promoting development.

Challenges

Poverty, land rights and food insecurity

Two thirds of the world's 1.4 billion people, who live in extreme poverty, reside in rural areas of developing nations, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development. The current global recession has had the greatest impact on poor rural families. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), when faced with a food crisis, poor rural women are forced to choose between purchasing food and sending their children to school or paying for an elderly relative's health expenses. Rural women are forced to work more and eat less nutritious food. They often go hungry to ensure that their children and husbands eat.

According to FAO, gender disparity in terms of access to land is a leading cause of social inequality Although women are major contributors to the agricultural labour force and produce more than half of the foodstuffs in many places around the world, they own less than 2 per cent of the world's land. Women also have less access to income from the land, less agricultural training and less access to credit that would enable them to develop their land. Combined, these factors leave rural women vulnerable to poverty and malnutrition. In addition, rural women are often most vulnerable to the negative effects of environmental degradation and climate change.

Education

According to figures provided by the United Nations Children's Fund in 2010, more than half of the estimated 101 million children worldwide who are not enrolled in school are girls. Gender inequality in terms of education and illiteracy

disproportionately affects rural women around the globe. Yet education could enhance the quality of life for rural women and girls, as it allows for the transfer of knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in a global economy, as well as having a positive impact on families and communities.

National disasters, wars and disease often prevent women and girls from pursuing an education. The need to travel great distances to schools and lack of public transportation are other barriers to education for rural women. Primary education can protect rural women from HIV, human trafficking and other forms of exploitation, according to data provided in 2010 by World Education, and empower them to rise out of poverty.

Health

As reflected in the Millennium Development Goals, improving maternal health is extremely vital to the advancement of society. Gaining access to quality health-care facilities is an immense challenge for rural women. Today, more than 15 million women are living with HIV and approximately 530,000 women die each year during pregnancy or childbirth, according to information provided in 2010 by Zonta International. Initiatives to prevent mother-to-child transmission of AIDS, as well as the creation of basic health services and the education of women on health-related issues, have improved, yet there is still more to be accomplished.

Rural women are vulnerable to health complications such as maternal and neonatal tetanus and obstetric fistula. Each year, according to the World Health Organization, between 50,000 and 100,000 women worldwide are affected by obstetric fistula, which is one of the major causes of maternal mortality. Those who survive obstetric fistula experience shame, social segregation and health problems. This condition can be avoided through education about maternal health and access to obstetric care.

Access to appropriate health-care services and education is vital to the livelihoods of rural women. Because of regional isolation, women are forced to travel for miles to the nearest doctor or hospital. This can be life-threatening when there are birth complications and a need for surgical interventions. Medical professionals are often not able to travel through war-torn areas to provide health care to rural women in their own communities.

Violence

Forms of gender-based violence, including rape, sexual slavery, human trafficking, forced pregnancy and other abuses, are considered human rights violations and crimes against humanity. Violence against women takes many forms and is an epidemic that affects women in all nations. The psychological and physical health of the survivor is compromised, as well as the well-being of families and communities.

Women and girls from rural communities suffer from violence within and outside their homes. In 2011, the World Health Organization has estimated that the prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence by a partner ranges from 30 to 60 per cent, reaching as high as 71 per cent in rural Ethiopia. Abuse against rural women is often unreported and not appropriately documented; therefore, its actual incidence around the world may be much higher.

Summary and recommendations

Rural women's experiences are diverse and must be examined within each unique geographical and cultural context. Despite overwhelming challenges, rural women of the world are leaders in their communities and contribute in significant ways to the well-being of society. They work as teachers, healers, agricultural workers, artists, community organizers, caretakers, activists and spiritual leaders. Rural women possess traditional knowledge that is invaluable for sustainable development, and care for the Earth. They are actively working to improve their own financial security through savings groups, cooperatives and small businesses. Rural women are empowering themselves to improve the lives of women everywhere.

The International Federation of Social Workers is deeply committed to creating a world in which all women and girls are protected from harm and provided with equal opportunities. Ultimately, it will take an international collaborative effort of United Nations agencies, Governments, civil society, non-governmental organizations and other key stakeholders to reduce the economic and social challenges faced by rural women.

The Federation makes the following recommendations:

- A higher degree of advocacy must be promoted within sovereign states to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other United Nations conventions that affect rural women;
- Since international mandates are often not implemented, even within signatory countries, national laws that promote women's rights need to be adopted and enforced;
- The international community should work towards increased education and skills training for rural women and girls who need access to technology and new technical knowledge concerning agricultural methods;
- Enhancement in health-care services and accessibility to health facilities for rural women should be addressed globally as a priority;
- Violence against women and girls should be addressed through collaborative partnerships between Governments, communities and civil society. Policy development, reform and implementation are imperative to eradicate violence against rural women;
- Greater emphasis should be placed on rural women's full participation in the creation of solutions to social problems and in all decision-making that affects their lives. Article 14 of the Convention affirms the importance of such participation in all aspects of policy development and implementation at the community, national and international levels. The international community must look to rural women and their unique knowledge, including with regard to successful microfinancing initiatives;
- Solutions must be analysed and implemented from within the context of interconnected familial and community systems. Any solution that limits social change to Government and external corporate actors will be ineffective;
- International social development needs to be understood as a culturally sensitive process. Development workers and advocates must be culturally competent in addressing gender inequality issues around the world.

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Statement

Education, a crucial foundation for rural women's economic empowerment

Access to quality education: a fundamental human right

Education is a human right that is fundamental to the achievement of many other human rights, the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed goals and commitments. If we are to achieve the goal of equality between men and women, it is essential that boys and girls have equal access to education at all levels. While much has been accomplished towards providing access to universal primary education in the past decade, the elimination of gender disparity in primary and especially secondary education is far from being achieved.

In the ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of its substantive session of 2011, the Economic and Social Council reaffirmed that education is essential for human development, sustainable development, world peace, just and democratic societies and the promotion of all human rights. Among the concerns expressed were those related to insufficient progress, persistent educational inequities among and within countries and the high dropout rate, especially of girls in secondary education. In the declaration, it was stressed that access to education needs to be accelerated, particularly for out-of-school children, rural populations and people living in vulnerable situations.

Education and economic empowerment strongly linked

Investing in human potential advances many development goals, among them health and gender equality. Evidence shows that educated women have more options, which gives them more control over their lives. There is also a clearly established, positive relationship between keeping girls in school and future earning power, as reported by the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Adolescent Girls, with estimates showing that each year of secondary schooling increases their future wages by 10 to 20 per cent.

Recognition that education is crucial for the empowerment of young people, especially young women and girls, is not enough. We must also ensure that the necessary political will and financial resources are available to enable all young people to enjoy their fundamental human right to education and to ensure that the education they receive prepares them for their future lives.

Globally, too many adolescent girls will not complete secondary education as many leave school early to help support their families. Girls under the age of 16 make up more than 90 per cent of the global domestic workforce, and according to Human Rights Watch, 70 per cent of the 130 million out-of-school young people are girls. In 19 African countries, the secondary school completion rate for adolescent girls is below 5 per cent.

Barriers to and strategies for ensuring full access for rural girls

Poverty puts girls, especially rural girls, at a distinct disadvantage in terms of education. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in the poorest households, approximately twice as many girls of secondary-

school age are out of school, compared with their wealthier peers. Girls are more often expected to remain at home looking after siblings and doing such household chores as cooking, cleaning and fetching water and firewood and farm work — or helping to augment family income. Many parents keep girls in school for as little time as possible because of their inability to afford school fees, uniforms, exercise books and supplies. Parents who perceive girls as having little potential for future income may opt not to invest in their education. Where a choice must be made, preference is still often given to boys.

If girls are to have full access to quality education, schooling, including the provision of uniforms, books and supplies, should be free until the final year of secondary level. Necessary investment needs to be found to provide financial stipends, to ensure easy access to clean water, near or on school grounds, and to increase access to cheap fuel, all of which will have a positive impact on girls' enrolment.

Distance to school and the lack of safe school environments are major barriers. Parents, concerned by the lack of safety for girls having to walk long distances to school and the lack of separate toilet facilities, keep girls, even the brightest ones, at home. Measures must be taken to ensure that girls can go to school safely and not be subjected to sexual or other forms of violence. Adapting school hours so that girls can travel between home and school in daylight hours, bringing schools closer to rural communities and the creation of better infrastructure to allow for more technologically advanced distance education programmes, are a few of the possible solutions.

If girls are to receive the education needed for their futures, other factors within communities must be addressed, among them the absence of positive role models. Owing to the persisting high rate of illiteracy, many adult rural women are not equipped to counsel the younger generations. Adult education programmes in rural areas must be intensified. Many rural communities also suffer from the absence or underrepresentation of female teachers. Financial incentives and safe housing are needed to attract more female teachers to these communities.

Traditional religious and cultural practices, such as female genital mutilation and early and/or forced marriage, contribute significantly to high rates of absenteeism and dropout from school. Evidence suggests that girls not enrolled in formal education have their first sexual experience and first child at an earlier age than girls enrolled in formal education and are more likely to be poor and forced into early marriage, or coerced into sex. They are more likely to leave school early, and to have little or no knowledge of sexuality, reproduction or HIV/AIDS. They are, therefore, more likely to be at risk, without access to contraception or health services, and to have too many children too close together. Conversely, educated women usually have their first sexual experience later, their first child later and have fewer children, who, as a result, are often healthier and better educated. Comprehensive sexuality education covering human rights, HIV prevention, gender equality, sexuality and active citizenship is a crucial part of formal and informal education.

Looking beyond access to quality education and future employment

If rural women are to achieve their full economic potential, we must look beyond school enrolment and completion, to question the quality and relevance of

the education provided. Students, particularly girls, must learn core and specialized skills that will equip them for entry into the labour market. In many rural areas, this need for skills is far from being met. The United Nations Development Programme estimates that students with five years of primary education, in some sub-Saharan countries, have a 40 per cent chance of being illiterate. Educated rural girls face disappointment if they are unable to find jobs that meet their qualifications. Other girls, seeing that staying in school does not lead to income, have little incentive to continue their education.

Many rural schools suffer from a shortage of qualified teaching personnel and equipment. Single teacher schools are often the norm, with teachers struggling to cope with large class sizes and a full range of subjects. In some cases, the teachers have little knowledge of some subjects that they are expected to teach. The level of tuition in science and mathematics, two subjects that are essential in today's technological world, is often below standard, or those subjects may even be absent from the curriculum. Even larger schools face the problem of relying on members of their teaching staff who lack the required academic and professional qualifications. Most rural schools operate with rudimentary infrastructures; few are equipped with modern information technology equipment. It is essential that strategies be found to attract more qualified teachers to rural areas and to provide adequate infrastructure.

Significant progress towards Goals 2 and 3 of the Millennium Development Goals has been noted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, in countries that have adopted an integrated approach, including such interventions as abolishing school fees, providing financial incentives, improving sanitation facilities, recruiting female teachers and reforming the curricula.

Conclusion

The International Federation of University Women and the Worldwide Organization for Women urge Governments, both from developing countries and from those countries that provide development assistance, to ensure that policies and programmes are put in place and that the necessary financial resources are provided to ensure that girls can enjoy full access to secondary education that provides a sound basis for their economic future. Such access and retention in secondary education will help to enable girls to progress to higher education or further training, to find gainful employment and to prevent a life of poverty.

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Statement submitted by International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and Madre, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges in Haiti

Violence against women in Haiti presents the greatest challenge to the empowerment and participation of women in society. Entrenched social norms both perpetuate and justify discrimination and violence against women and deprive women of a multitude of the legal rights that men enjoy. Violence occurs in both rural and urban environments and in many forms, including physical, sexual and psychological. In particular, domestic and sexual violence occurs with alarming frequency. Haiti's complete ban on abortion has also resulted in physical and emotional hardship for women who have become pregnant as a result of sexual violence. Moreover, human rights defenders are targets for violence, including rape and extortion, for their work defending victims and promoting women's rights.

The empowerment of women is central to the obligation of the Government of Haiti to eliminate violence against women. Economic empowerment will allow women to overcome patriarchal hierarchies that facilitate and encourage violence. Moreover, legal empowerment will increase access to justice to combat impunity, which has reinforced the perception of aggressors that they can inflict violence without punishment. As stressed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, the broader agenda for women's empowerment must integrate and prioritize efforts to combat violence against women.

In December 2010, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights recognized that sexual violence against displaced women and girls is a serious problem in Haiti. The Commission issued a groundbreaking decision requesting that the Government of Haiti take urgent measures to address sexual violence, including increased security patrols, improved lighting in the camps, adequate medical care, legal accountability and the participation and leadership of grass-roots women's groups in anti-violence policies and practices. United Nations special rapporteurs and the independent expert appointed by the Secretary-General on the situation of human rights in Haiti have echoed the Commission's calls.

Haitian women and girls are disproportionately susceptible to social inequities, discrimination and violence because of limitations on their access to economic and other resources. Many women have been left alone with the burden of caring for their own families, including increased numbers of orphans who come under their care, owing to inequalities in the criminal justice system that leave men to languish in prison for years without seeing a judge.

Economic hardship has forced women and girls to engage in sexual exchange to provide basic necessities for themselves and their families, including food, and to pay for education. In November 2011, a delegation of lawyers investigated the issue, interviewing several young women (18 to 24 years of age) engaged in sexual exchange, as well as Government officials and civil society actors. Girls from rural regions attending schools in cities are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Rural communities cite that adolescent and teenage girls who leave their homes to attend school in major cities frequently return to their villages pregnant. In addition, interviews of rural and urban women conducted by a public health consultant in

August 2011 revealed that women who are willing to exchange sexual favours may be more likely to obtain employment and to receive higher pay or better-located positions.

A legal framework for addressing discrimination and violence against women exists in Haiti. The Haitian Constitution guarantees equality and other fundamental human rights. Further, Haiti has ratified treaties including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará). The Government of Haiti is also in the process of finalizing draft legislation establishing rights and protections for women victims of violence and seeks to amend Haiti's civil and penal codes related to violence against women. Although the language of the draft text does not explicitly legalize abortion, it appears to recognize that abortion is legal in some instances. Notwithstanding these developments, the failure to empower women to engage with the legal system, and society more generally, will hinder the implementation of the new law.

Numerous barriers prevent the effective implementation of laws associated with violence against women. Victims often face discriminatory attitudes, distrust and minimization by police and prosecutors. Although there are some organizations that provide legal representation for victims of sexual violence, there are many women and girls who do not have awareness of, or access to, legal representation and services. If a woman is unrepresented, her case is most likely not pursued owing to the disorganization and corruption which plague the justice system. Furthermore, the lack of training among police and prosecutors leads to confusion and lost opportunities for women and girls to build a viable case before evidence is lost. When acts of sexual and other violence against women are perpetrated by acquaintances (as is often the case in rural areas), the cases are ignored as domestic issues to be settled by the family outside the justice system.

Haitian women and girls often file complaints at great risk to their personal safety. Even for those with counsel, the system is unwieldy and long. Prolonged delays put women and girls who are living in close proximity to their aggressors in danger. There is a lack of long-term safe shelters to house victims during the legal process. In addition, while some accused attackers are arrested, many accused are released shortly after arrest, especially in cases where the victim has no legal representation.

Although a medical certificate is not technically mandatory under Haitian law, in practice, officials in the Haitian justice system consider it a requirement for pursuing complaints of sexual violence. This reinforces the belief in the justice system that the testimony of women is inherently untrustworthy. In addition, women face substantial barriers to obtaining a medical certificate. Women living in remote areas must travel significant distances to a hospital. Even if a woman is able to get to the hospital, it may be closed because of a strike or lack of electricity. Moreover, in many cases, even the best medical examination will not produce any relevant evidence. Additionally, the lack of a uniform medical certificate across institutions has posed an obstacle. In some instances, the prosecutors' office has turned away victims because their medical certificates did not provide enough detail. In sum, the persistence of violence against women is intrinsically linked to the social norms that condone it and the impunity that results when the existing laws are not enforced.

We respectfully urge the Commission on the Status of Women to recommend that the Government of Haiti:

1. Implement the decision of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights calling on the Government of Haiti to take urgent measures to prevent and protect displaced women and girls from sexual violence.

2. Adopt legislation to address sexual and gender-based violence that complies with international standards and incorporates recommendations from civil society, including a provision that amends the law to allow for abortion, at the very least, in cases of rape or incest, or where the mental or physical health of the mother is in danger.

3. Support the growth of the Women's Ministry, while simultaneously promoting the evolution of the Ministère à la Condition Féminine et aux Droits des Femmes to be more inclusive of the ideas, opinions and participation of Haitian grass-roots women's organizations.

4. Undertake efforts to combat impunity for violence against women by allocating sufficient resources to conduct criminal investigations, harmonizing the medical certificate process, holding all actors in the justice system accountable and implementing special protections for human rights defenders.

5. Facilitate the ability of women to leave abusive relationships by increasing the services available to victims of domestic violence, including safe shelters and economic assistance, and encouraging criminal prosecutions where warranted.

6. Consult and engage civil society throughout the country and seek input on efforts to decentralize resources and power to rural areas with a view to building a stronger and more equitable society.

7. Adopt measures that better protect human rights, including improved collaboration among the Government, the United Nations and grass-roots women's organizations.

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Statement submitted by International Health Awareness Network, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Please recycle

Statement

International Health Awareness Network (IHAN), a non-governmental organization affiliated with the Economic and Social Council and the Department of Public Information, supports the theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women on the empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges. In developing countries, women are at the forefront of agriculture. IHAN is committed to promoting this theme through education, advocacy and partnerships with rural women and other organizations to establish centres that will provide specific tools needed to enable the advancement of women.

The role of rural women is not solely limited to the normatively accepted generic position in society. Rural women today not only uphold the position as household labourers but also take on responsibilities outside family life. Women in the rural sphere partake in paid and unpaid agricultural and agro-industrial work. These women carry out different tasks in their communities, such as those of entrepreneurs, traders and providers of services. Women in some communities become leaders through advocacy work and awareness-raising on the issues affecting them. This affirms the fact that rural women extend their work beyond raising a family. Bearing in mind the myriad tasks encountered by rural women, their access to work and education is crucial for sustainable development. Addressing their needs can bring many benefits to the community.

Many of the challenges that women face are directly linked to the economic, social, financial and trade-based trends that result from Government policy at the national and international levels. Yet policy is not the only barrier; living in remote areas also limits women. Demographic surroundings determine the accessibility that inhabitants will have. Therefore, the immediate environment plays an uncontrollable and mostly unfortunate restrictive role which decreases rural women's access to technology, health care and the market. Traditional and cultural practices can also hinder the promotion and advancement of women. Certain practices prevent women from seeking greater freedoms and social interactions. The lack of education reaffirms that women are excluded from enhancing their social and economic contributions. Illiteracy decreases women's ability in decision-making processes, thereby hindering their full and equal participation in society.

IHAN deplores the fact that a lack of education may lead women into a poverty trap. Research shows that the alleviation of poverty serves to help the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals. Rural women, who cultivate about half of the world's food, do not own the land on which they work. Their lack of participation in the economic sphere makes it increasingly difficult to obtain financial credit and loans. Women are underemployed and underpaid everywhere. IHAN calls upon Governments, the private sector and non-governmental organizations to be the agents for empowering rural women.

For the past 25 years, IHAN has been working with rural women through field projects on health and education. Empowering these women is the means to preserve values, traditions, entire cultures, our planet and its resources. IHAN believes that the creation of resource centres, specifically designed to address local needs, would strengthen women's involvement in the community.

The local resource centres could provide education through donated books, the Internet and interactions with others. They would also be used to teach art, music, storytelling and culture. IHAN recommends the creation of a college credit programme in which student volunteers would assist those with literacy needs by familiarizing rural women with the devices provided in the centre. This translates into further education, because by teaching women how to use tools such as the Internet, women can be empowered to continue learning on their own.

Technology would not be limited to computers and the Internet. Recycled cellular phones would facilitate transportation and communication and would provide women with access to mobility. Access to cellular devices would save time, money and energy. Women would be able to call for transportation to go to cities or places where they need to find things for household work. Calls could be made to ensure that routes to these places are working as expected and are safe. With the Internet and cellular devices, women who work on the farms are able to know when a change in the weather will affect crops, as well as take preventive action in communicating with others or preparing alone.

Recognizing that not all women participate in paid work and that many communities raise a child collectively, the resource centres could create a day-care programme. Mothers along with their children could spend time at the centre. The programme would directly help mothers, as well as the community.

Coping with hardships could also be a result of interaction within these centres. Many women face tragic experiences due to unfortunate living conditions and never receive physical or, more importantly, emotional support. These centres would unite women from neighbouring areas, who are most likely to share similar experiences. Conversation and interaction could also lead to women becoming empowered to speak out on the issues of the community.

Women face multiple challenges, ranging from those related to supporting the household and providing child care to fear of violence both near to and far from the home. Cultural, societal and national reasons can be tied to violence, but securing its end is more difficult to determine. An environment that is secure allows for growth and prosperity. These local centres will provide women with support and strength to realize their potential and be agents of change. Realizing their potential will spark feelings of self-sufficiency and thus allow for empowerment.